

'Dreams Like Space'

Claire Bodi

Aurora Topher's blue eyes slowly blinked open as the frosted glass lid above her slid away. She sat up from the thin padding and stretched the stiffness from her limbs, and as she looked around, she realized that she had been the first to wake up from cryosleep. She swung her legs over the edge of the pod and took a few shaky steps toward the tube next to her. Through the fogged glass, she could just make out the peaceful face of the man encased within. Etched neatly on the metal plating was the name Captain Spence D. Griffith.

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*From the distance, a voice shouted, "Hey Aurora! Wait up!"*

*The young girl paused on the sidewalk and turned to see a sandy-haired boy running up to her, wildly waving his arms.*

*Before she could ask what was wrong, her best friend grabbed her by the shoulders and practically yelled, "They're launching the probe to Alpha Centauri right now!"*

*"What?!" she cried, surprised. "I thought that wasn't scheduled for another month!"*

*Without another moment's pause, she grabbed her friend's hand and sprinted toward her house, dark hair streaming behind her as she went.*

*While they ran, the boy explained between breaths, "They finished the probe ahead of schedule.. because of some new scientist.. they added to the team.., so they decided.. to push the launch forward, too."*

*They lept up the steps to Aurora's home and flicked on the tv without even closing the front door behind them. She frantically scanned the channels, and when she finally found the right one, they both stood mesmerized as the probe Quest was propelled through their atmosphere with a mighty blast. The newscaster's voice was barely registered by the two as he spoke of Quest's mission, the highly advanced technology it was equipped with, and, "most exciting of all", that the trip would only take about a year to complete. The kids were too caught up in their imaginations of alien planets and traveling through the stars at faster than light speed to pay much attention. They smiled at each other as they shared the same dream that they hoped to fulfill together.*

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After dressing in her uniform, Aurora checked the navigation system and saw that they were a few hours away from Kepler-186f. Her heart fluttered with the anticipation of finally setting foot on a new world, of being somewhere no one else had ever been. For years, she had been waiting, dreaming, training for this opportunity. She had worked hard and sacrificed everything to become the best of the best so that there would be no reason that she couldn't go into space. This was the only thing she had ever wanted to do, and she was just a few hours away from achieving it. She couldn't help but laugh a little to herself.

"What's so funny?" a voice said softly behind her.

Aurora turned around to find Spence, already in uniform, smiling knowingly at her.

Somewhat embarrassed, she ducked her head and replied, "It's nothing, Captain Griffith. Just a little excited is all."

He chuckled as he walked past her to the control panel.

"You always were such a dreamer, Topher."

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*Aurora fell to the ground, panting so hard she felt her lungs may burst. It had barely been a month since she started the Kepler training program, and she was already on the verge of failure. Though she excelled in her studies and engineering, she was weak and couldn't handle physical training. During morning runs, while all the other potential recruits surged ahead, she was always left behind to gasp in the dust. So she began to train on her own in secret during the cool nights, doing whatever she could to gain an advantage over the others. But the harder she tried, the weaker she felt. All she managed to do was push herself to the brink of exhaustion.*

*That's where Aurora was that night, lying in the dirt and staring up at the stars, defeated. Tears streamed down her face as she clenched her teeth in frustration, and the stars above her blurred until she could barely make them out.*

*Suddenly, she heard feet crunching on the ground in front of her, and she jerked up painfully, afraid it was the Director come to chew her out. Instead, she saw the sandy hair and concerned face of her best friend. He opened his mouth to speak but stopped short when he noticed the tears shining off Aurora's face. His eyes widened, and he stepped forward, enveloping her as gently and tightly as he could in his arms. He held her for a long time before he finally spoke.*

*"I know it's hard. I know that you're angry with yourself, but you can't keep doing this." He pulls away but keeps a firm hold on her shoulders. "You need to stop before you kill yourself."*

*"I can't do that!" she yelled in his face.*

*She stared at the ground and repeated more softly, "I can't do that. This is my dream. This is all I've ever wanted in life, and now... I've almost lost it.. just because I can't run or lift stupid weights."*

*Tears ran down her face anew while her hands gripped the ground angrily. Her body shook with subdued sobs, and it was several minutes before she could control herself again.*

*“They’re going to kick me out for sure,” she whimpered.*

*Aurora felt a tightening on her shoulders. Remembering that her friend still had a hold of her, she looked up to see brown eyes filled with determination and defiance.*

*He smiled as he said confidently, “No they won’t. Because I’m going to help you.”*

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The rest of the crew were finally awake and dressed. After eating some kind of synthesized goop, they eagerly headed toward the main deck to wait for their arrival at Kepler-186f. Before them was a large viewing window, through which they could see the stars reduced to streaks by their high speed.

A tone suddenly sounded and the female voice of the ship’s computer said, “Five minutes until the ship drops out of warp speed.”

They waited, watched, the tension and excitement growing in them exponentially. Though Aurora was intensely focused on the window, she noticed that Spence’s hands were trembling slightly. Her eyes trailed up to his face where a huge grin had taken over. She was almost a little startled for it was very rare that he would express such strong emotions, but she supposed that space could do anything to a person.

She smiled and turned back toward the window as the computer counted down, “10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.”

The pause seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Then they blinked and the barren planet almost magically appeared before them in all its strange beauty. There was silence between them because they each knew that there were no words that could express their awe. They just

watched the clouds drift slowly through the thin atmosphere, knowing that their dreams had finally come true.

All of a sudden, an alarm sounded harshly and lights flashed red as the computer said, “Warning: proximity alert. Collision eminent.”

As everyone rushed to their stations, the image through the window shifted and zoomed in on an object heading towards them. It was an asteroid and a huge one at that.

“How the hell did we not see that sooner?!” Captain Spence yelled angrily above the alarm still going off.

One of the other crew members responded, “It must have come from behind the planet! Our scanners couldn’t detect it until it circled around.”

“Start up the engines!” Spence shouted. “That thing will smash us to pieces if we don’t get out of its path!”

A woman called back, “We can’t! The engines shut down after we came out of warp! We aren’t going anywhere.”

Her voice drifted off and true panic took hold of the crew as they realized the hopelessness of their situation. After all they had learned, after the years of training, there was nothing they could do to save themselves.

“No! There has to be something we can do!” Aurora cried desperately while she swiped the screen at her station, looking for a solution. “Maybe we can use the thrusters or decompress one of the shuttle ports or-!”

She was cut off abruptly when someone grabbed her trembling hands.

“Topher, we don’t have enough time. It’s no use,” Spence said quietly.

Aurora squeezed his hands tightly as tears streaked down her face, and, disregarding all professionalism, she wrapped her arms around his waist while she cried. He held her tightly, whispering over and over again in her ear ‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry’.

“Twenty seconds to collision,” the computer warned.

When the voice began to count down, all the crew could do was watch the asteroid draw closer. No one said anything, this time because of shock, because of despair. Little bits of rock that had broken off the main body of the asteroid clunked against the hull of the ship, growing louder and cracking the main viewing window. Everyone braced themselves and closed their eyes for the crash, but in their last few seconds, Spence looked down at Aurora and whispered something so quietly that she couldn’t hear it. She didn’t have to though because his lips on hers were read loud and clear.

‘I love you, Aurora.’

The asteroid hit soundlessly, shattering the front of the ship and tearing its way through the rest of it. Chunks of metal and glass, hopes and dreams, were sent spinning into the black void of nothingness. Some landed on Kepler’s surface while others were burned away by a star, sent to be reborn as someone else’s future. One day, they would know of the sacrifices that were made. One day, they would live the lives that others couldn’t.

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*It had been a few hours since the ship had left Earth’s atmosphere, and after running several thorough systems checks, the crew began preparing for cryosleep. One by one, they climbed into their glass tubes and fell into a deep, cold stasis. At last, the only ones left awake were Aurora and her best friend. They were so excited that they almost couldn’t stop talking about the planet and their adventure ahead. They laughed with each other as they dreamed of their new lives and*

*relived with great relief their struggles through the Kepler program. Though they both greatly enjoyed talking with each other, they knew that it was time for them to go into stasis as well. So they strolled over to their tubes and carefully climbed in, but before they laid down to sleep, they looked at each other and smiled.*

*“Good night, Captain Griffith,” Aurora said jokingly.*

*Spence just chuckled and grinned at her, saying softly, “Good night, Aurora. I’ll see you soon.”*